

Nikolay Milyutin, *Sotsgorod* (The Socialist City)

## Sex and the Socialist City: How the Party Ends Up in the Kitchen

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This article began as a presentation for the 2011 Historical Materialism conference in New York City. Its title, of course, references the popular television program *Sex and the City*, which serves as a collective fantasy of both sex and the city and works as a primer of social relations that, in the manner of the fictional advice column that it is based on, offers instruction and provides models for urban life. In the program “the city” is as much an ideal structure within which people negotiate relationships as it is a real place. Likewise, the “Socialist City” or *Sotsgorod* is not a real place but a model, put forward in 1930 by People’s Commissar of Finance Nikolay A. Milyutin, for new cities built in the Soviet Union as part of the first five-year plan. As can be seen from diagrams of the Socialist City, it is organized by both geometric abstraction – specifically linearity – and the abstraction of material processes in industrial production. Sex in the Socialist City is



Worker in Magnetogorsk, photo by Margaret Bourke-White

thus not real sex in a real place, so it will, unfortunately not be possible to narrate the libidinal escapades of emancipated factory girls or reveal what really went on in the showers at the Palace of Sport. What does appear in the plans for the Sotsgorod is a plan not only for industrial production but for the reproduction of new sets of social relations. This plan then becomes a screen onto which dream images of the future can be projected and a program by which aspirations to literally build new society can be carried out.

As much as it was a practical model for construction, the Socialist City was intended to present the architectural and urban implications of the Soviet project to the larger world. Leftist architects in Western Europe took it up as both a perfected realization of and radical alternative to modernist planning doctrines then being codified. This double identity of the Sotsgorod as both a practical model and a utopian ideal stands out in sharp relief in an article “Moscow: City Building in the USSR” that German architect Ernst May published in *Das Neue Russland* in 1931. In the article May reports back from the Soviet Union upon returning to Berlin for a working meeting of the CIAM project team that was developing the “functional city project” – a work of critical mapping and research that would establish a basis for another important model for urbanism, the Athens Charter.



*Deutsche Bauen in der UdSSR (Germans building in the USSR), Das Neue Frankfurt*

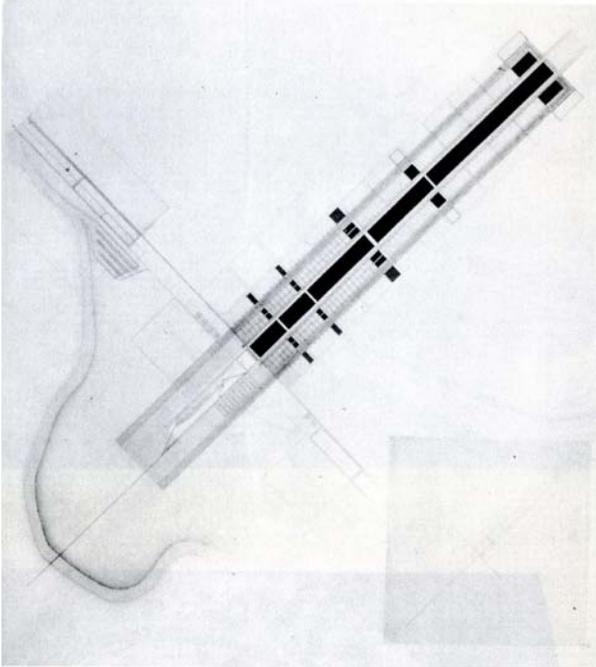
May and a number of other Bauhaus-trained leftist architects had gone to Russia to contribute to the massive program of city building and industrial construction undertaken under the auspices of the first five-year plan. May's article is intended as an explanation of both the technical scope and what he saw as the ideological stakes of the Soviet construction program. May, however, seems to struggle in connecting the organizational form of the city and the pragmatic realities of his work as a planner and designer with a larger project of social restructuring. "If there is any one area of endeavor in the USSR where the revolution is still in full motion," May begins, "then city building and dwelling construction must be considered first. This is not surprising, for the replacement of a thousand-year-old social system by a new one is a process that will take more than just a dozen years to complete, or even to provide a clear and unequivocal direction."<sup>2</sup> It is clear to May that this work of building a new world must begin immediately and that it must be undertaken not as a utopian projection but in real, material terms. Also clear is that the new world will require a new architecture. Exactly what that architecture will be or how it will relate to social structures, however, remains a difficult question for May. This uncertainty imparts a tension and frisson to the article and inverts the pairing of formal surety and political ambivalence or opportunism that often characterizes contemporary accounts of modernism.



Ernst May, et al., Pannelized Construction System

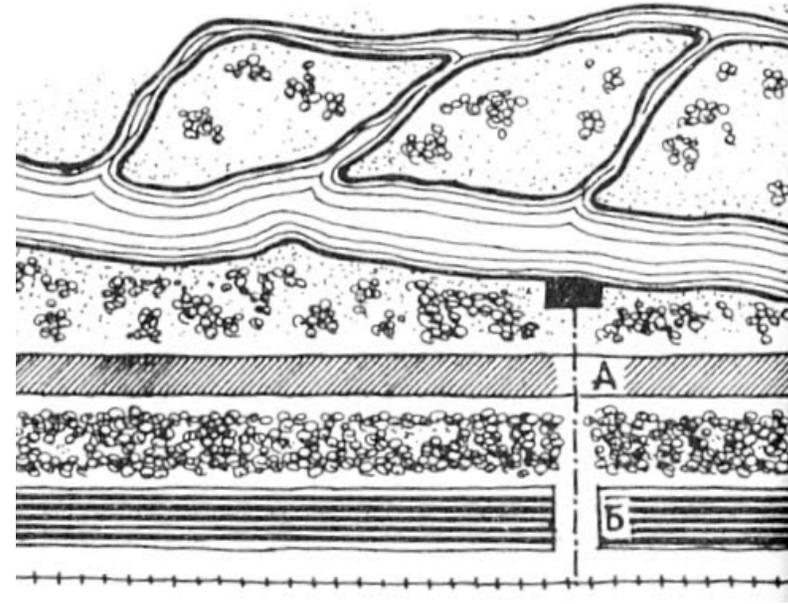
May uses the section heading "The Structure of the Socialist City" twice: once to discuss the physical layout of circulation, housing and production facilities and then later to explain the reorganization of production and consumption under collectivization and its relation to gender roles and family life in the new society. The way that these two valences are related to one another and how they both are allowed to become the "structure" of the city makes "City Building in the USSR" both strange and relevant as more than a historical artifact.

Milyutin's model calls for a "linear city" plan that clearly distinguishes between and separates housing and industry. Green space, often designated as having a "recreational" function, served as a buffer between the two, and roads and transit systems connected them by moving material and shuttling people between home and work. The concept of the linear city was not a Soviet invention but rather was synthesized from a number of motifs emerging from progressive discourses on the city and corporatist and technocratic ideas about rationalized social management. Le Corbusier, who by the late 1920's had emerged as a dominant figure in the ideological formation of modernist architecture, first articulated what he called the "four functions" (housing, industry, recreation, and circulation) of architecture and politicized linearity as the essential form industrial production in his 1929 scheme for the *Ville Radieuse* or radiant city. In the *Ville Radieuse* the



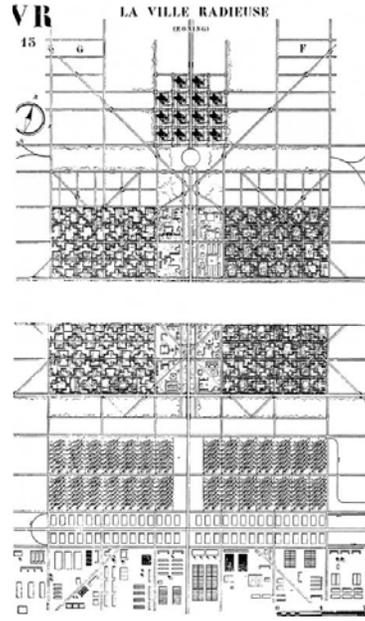
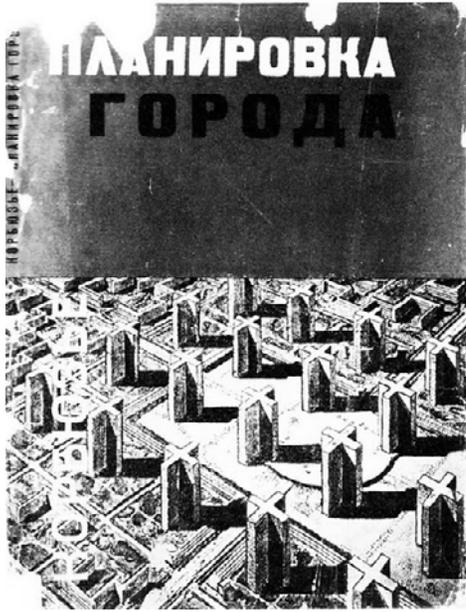
Georgy Lavrov, *Linear City*

separation of functions was set in opposition to the darkness, filth and social disorder of the cities of the industrial revolution in which industrial facilities had either emerged in an ad hoc way in the midst of older city forms or been constructed in previously rural areas and accreted workers' housing around themselves. The linear arrangement was posited as a "rational" alternative to cities organized concentrically around either symbolic representations of state power or marketplaces. While not explicit in Le Corbusier's writings, the linearity of the *Ville Radieuse* stands as a formal metaphor for the Fordist assembly line that so was admired both by the Bolsheviks and by Le Corbusier and his ideological patrons in French Syndicalist and Saint-Simonian technocratic circles. The leftist faction of the Bauhaus critiqued the model offered by *Ville Radieuse* as being blind to class struggle and antagonistic social relations in general. May implies that however Le Corbusier's city may look, it still had a concentric quality that it could not be escaped except into socialism. "The capitalist city," May writes in "City building in the USSR", "has developed concentrically around the market place and while the rich, the middle classes, and the proletarians live in clearly separated districts of their own – this differentiation of class structures being recognizable from afar and defining the capitalist cities particular character and form – the city of the USSR knows only one class, the class of the working people."<sup>3</sup> Only in classlessness does May see the opportunity to achieve the truly de-centered, destratified, industrial efficiency promised by the linear city concept.



Nikolay Milyutin, *Functional Separation*

The problem of the industrial city was different in the Soviet context. The Soviets hoped to accomplish what a succession of tsars had failed to do in liberating Russia from its feudal, agrarian "backwardness" and building a modern, urban, industrialized culture. As in the past, a central role in this social "building" was accorded to literal building. Also, foreign architects were invited to come to Russia to contribute both technical expertise and cultural acuity to the project. In the 1930s however, the proposition was not as linear as it had been when Prince Ivan III invited Italian architects to come to Russia during the Renaissance or when French, *Beaux-Arts*-trained architects were imported by Peter the Great. In the mid 1920's, with Russia still struggling to rebuild after war and revolution, El Lissitzky had traveled through Europe as something of a cultural ambassador, staging exhibitions and bringing constructivist art and architecture to the West. He was most enthusiastically received in Rotterdam, where he met with Gerrit Rietveld and influenced the formation of *Der Stijl*, and in Berlin where he met Walter Gropius and other leftist members of the Bauhaus faculty. As much as the formal investments of the Soviet avant-garde were integrated into the aesthetics of the Bauhaus, the intense focus on both the material processes and the culture of industrial production and mass consumption were taken up as well and, in the context of Western Europe, much more readily applied to the contemporary situation. Constructivist architects of the 1920's idealized the forms of Western factories and skyscrapers as symbols of the industrialized future they hoped for in the Soviet Union but



Le Corbusier, *Towards a New Architecture* (Russian Transilation), plan for *La Ville Radieuse*

struggled to find points at which they could engage with and transform the social relations that produced them.

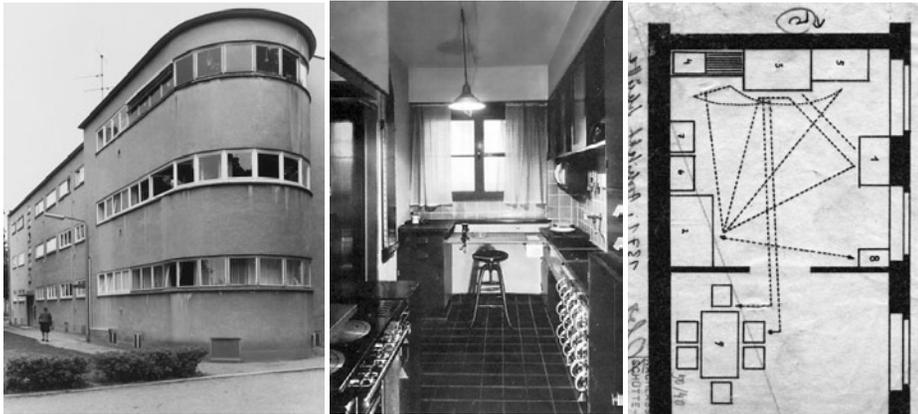
Founded as it was under the auspices of the *Deutscher Werkbund*, the Bauhaus designers found themselves in the position of creating consumer products to be used within the cultural regime of industrial capital. From this vantage point the Soviet Union seemed to offer the possibility of a system of production and consumption under which objects could be liberated from the symbolic overdetermination of the commodity fetish and be purely functional and useful. Bauhaus discourses on gender developed as a critique of bourgeois gender roles and family structure that had organized architecture and design in the Victorian era. On both symbolic and practical levels, efforts were made to develop a certain (fairly masculine) androgyny in personal style and break down gender distinctions in the division of productive labor. A larger and more difficult challenge, however, was articulating, through design, an alternative to the “feminized” passivity of consumer culture that offered the possibility of a life of total production and the construction of a modern identity based on productive capacities. Thus, when teams of Bauhaus-affiliated architects left for the Soviet Union in the early 1930's, they carried with them several layers of hopeful double projections that had been passed back and forth between *avant gardes* in the industrialized West and in the new revolutionary society.

May was among the most prominent of the Western architects who came to the Soviet Union, especially in terms of being an experienced city planner. He had left a post as the director of city planning in Frankfurt, where he had been involved in a highly politicized competition between left-wing and right-wing city governments to build new, modern housing that both won them popular support and came inscribed with a model for living according their ideological principles. In this, housing was taken as the primary site of social reproduction and therefore the site of struggle over personal values and everyday activity that was seen to add up to produce larger cultural and political effects. Especially in leftist housing discourses, it was important that the intricately nested spheres of privacy, filled with gender-specific spaces and furnishings (for example the man's study and the woman's boudoir where not only labor power but also individual identity is reproduced) that characterized 19th century bourgeois domesticity be made to give way to the linearized, materialist logic of industrial production applied to the reproductive functions of the home. In Frankfurt Kitchen, designed by Margarete Schütte-Lihotzky for one of May's housing projects, this Taylorized, industrial efficiency is applied to the kitchen with the polemical intention of liberating women's time from domestic drudgery.

Schütte-Lihotzky came to the Soviet Union as part of Ernst May's “May Brigade”, as the group of architects that he brought with him from Frankfurt was called. There they would find a project of social restructuring



Ernst May, *Magnetogorsk General Plan*



Ernst May, *Neue Frankfurt*

Margarete Schütte-Lihotzky, *Frankfurt Kitchen*

underway that ran parallel to their own concerns with gender and the family. In the Soviet context the idea of “liberating the labor of women”, as well as general campaigns for education and against all sorts of “backwardness”, had as much to do with individual freedom as it did finding the most efficient way of performing the reproductive functions of domestic work and freeing up more labor power for production. May asserts that: “It is a declared aim of the Soviet political system to put the energies of all citizens capable of work in the service of the state — men and women alike. Communism considers it a waste of valuable time and out of tune with modern life to see the function of woman in terms of lifelong cooking and dusting, when she should be contributing both physically and intellectually to the common good, using her free time to cultivate both body and mind. Actually, such a view merely expresses the thoughts of hundreds of thousands, nay millions, of progressive individuals in all parts of the world. As far as the full mobilization of all the total working force is concerned, this is not really a pressing problem in capitalist countries, particularly in the face of their present catastrophic unemployment, which has forced this issue very much into the background. Conditions in the USSR are quite different. When the Russian delegate in Geneva was recently offered a post on a commission that was to concern itself with the problem of unemployment, he coupled his acceptance with the remark that the Union which he represented was not faced with this problem.”<sup>4</sup>

There had been a progression of architectural devices that hoped to facilitate these transformations. Beginning in the 1920's, constructivist architects (Lissitzky, Rodchenko and Melnikov most importantly) designed workers' clubs that sought to provide new centers of socialist life where workers could spend their leisure time enjoying cultural activities and learning and performing the new social relations of the new society. The

clubs were conceived of as “social condensers” that would collectivize the process of cultural and political formation and move it increasingly out of the sphere of home and the family. In his manifesto *Russia: An Architecture for World Revolution*, Lissitzky describes the club and its condenser-like qualities as a “new spatial volume... capable of providing all the age groups of the working masses with facilities for recreation and relaxation after a day's work, i.e. a place to store up new sources of energy. Here each child, each adolescent, each adult as well as all the older people, [can] be educated into becoming collective human beings, outside the circle of their families, while their individual interests [can] be enlarged and broadened at the same time”<sup>5</sup> Milyutin and Moisei Guinzburg would go on to develop plans to apply the “social condenser” concept to housing itself in projects such as the Narkomfin building. Here kitchens were minimized in individual housing units and consolidated in large “super kitchens” operated by full time staff. Childcare was provided as well, allowing women to enter the workforce, and in more radical plans individual sleeping quarters were provide so that people could sleep together as they wished. The scaling up of the social condenser — from workers' club, to mass housing to the entire city — and the shift in its focus from symbolic representation to more practical material concerns mirror the evolution of constructivism into a range of productivist practices that sought to bring artists and designers into the space of the factory and engage them directly with production.

May presents his version of the socialist city as a continued expansion of the social condenser concept to the scale of urban planning and suggests that its cultural effects could be carried beyond the emancipation of women to the liquidation of the traditional family altogether. He follows a discussion of collectivized food service and childcare arrangements with a strong assertion: “Regrets or no regrets, the fact remains that the traditional image of the family is in the process of extinction. Our youth find no pleasure in wasting their time in instructive conversations with aunts and uncles, particularly when their time can be much better spent in the systematic cultivation of their minds and bodies or in the company of members of their own age group. Many people will admit that much, but they will hesitate to admit that their wives are in fact being communized, even in cases where this has become an actual fact without their recognizing it as such.”<sup>6</sup>

Lest his German audience be scandalized by the idea of “communized” wives, or perhaps hear echoes of the “free love” ideology of progressive utopian movements such as the Oneida community that also linked gender and labor, May backs off from discussing what actually might go on in the private lives of the revolutionary proletarians. Beginning with a squeamish refusal May asserts, “I do not wish to dwell on this subject any longer, but just the same I would like to point out that my personal



Konstantin Melnikov, *Rusakov Workers' Club*



El Litzizkey, Chess Table for a Workers Club

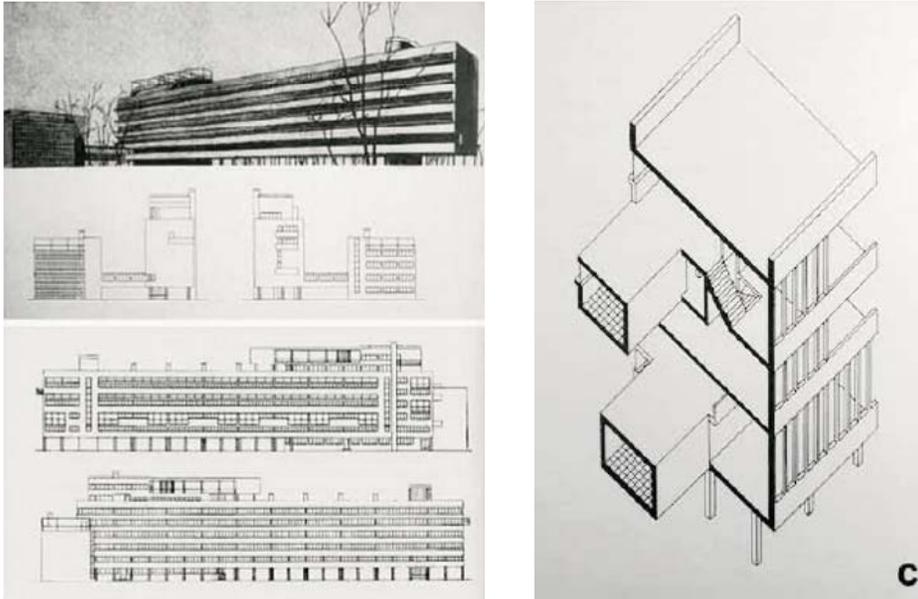


El Litzizkey, Workers Club Reading Room

impression is that hypocrisy in the USSR in all matters of sex is being condemned, and that in terms of purity and natural morality its standards are on an exceptionally high level, unknown to us.”<sup>7</sup> May assures us that “[t]he relationship between man and woman in the context of collective life has been left untouched and is being regarded as a strictly private affair between individuals.”<sup>8</sup> May then moves on to a discussion of education and childcare that suggests adding crèches to factories so that nursing mothers can feed their babies on work breaks and otherwise separating parents and children so that the new generation can be brought up without the tainted traditions of the past. From here May goes on to discuss the difficulties of actually finding the resources to build the communal housing, childcare and educational facilities he imagines. Given the state of the Soviet economy in 1930 and 1931 these difficulties are understandable. May, however, betrays his call for a society of total production by discussing these facilities that should be productive capital goods (condensers or reaction chambers in a huge, unitary factory city that, in industrial terms, “pays for itself”) as consumer goods that must be paid for. It is in these terms in fact that the plans of both the Russian productivists and May and the other foreign architects were first critiqued and then finally condemned by more Stalinist elements in the central planning apparatus.

Rhetorics of austerity were used to characterize radical social programs as being too expensive or disruptive and disorienting to a populace

exhausted by war and dislocation. Social continuity and the populist aesthetic of Socialist Realism was established as official doctrine in the 1932 Communist Party edict “Concerning the Reorganization of Literary Artistic Societies”. In practical terms this effected the expulsion of foreign architects from the country and the disciplining and marginalization of the Russian *avant garde*. Wilm Stein, another German architect working in the Soviet Union, published something of an apology for the Soviet state decision in *Bauwelt* entitled “Experiment: ‘Socialist Cities’: Realization of Communes Too Expensive — Therefore Postponed.”<sup>9</sup> In this he gives a bleak account of the state of housing construction and asserts that “the ‘Socialist city’ is still far removed from reality and that, as far as the foreseeable future is concerned, we shall have to be satisfied with a few model projects of so-called ‘collective dwellings,’ a few functional modernistic clubs, and some communal apartment buildings that are really nothing but demeaned hotels, devoid of luxury, and modified to fit the workers’ daily routine, being ‘Socialist collective’ dwellings only in name: viz., single-bedroom apartments, common living rooms, dining halls, recreation rooms complemented by nurseries, laundries, and electric superkitchens.”<sup>10</sup> Stein buttresses his argument for this with series of dreary statistics about how light wood construction is cheaper than concrete and steel, but the question of being “debased” seems to underlie the pragmatic rationalizations. He writes of the party and the Soviet press denouncing “right-wing opportunists” who “for reasons of economy... recommend the construction of housing barracks” (a charge often



Mose Guinsberg, Nikolay Milyutin, *NARKOMFIN Housing*

leveled against May and his brigade) while “even more violently” rejecting “leftists” and “ultraradicals,” whom they accused of espousing “gigantism in the form of costly and enormous projects,” and the “wild dreamers” who dared ask for their visionary cities at once, and who advocated the “full socialization of the entire life style, the separation of children from their parents, and similar things connected with fancy project-making.” Citing May’s work on Magnitogorsk and Stalingrad as specific examples of “fancy projects,” he acknowledges that this is “quite a blow to Communist theory. However, it is also an indicator of a return to healthier and more sober attitudes on the part of the Soviet government, a fact which has lately been noticeable in other areas as well and which leads one to accept that a way has been found out of the utopian obsession, with its wild dreams, toward more reasonable policies of economic recovery and stability.”<sup>11</sup>

If the project of recovery is to be articulated in economic terms, then stability is more cultural. “It should not be overlooked,” Stein asserts, “that the mood of the population — particularly the working population — strongly resisted collectivization; this indicates that aside from the aforementioned reasons, the retreat of the party was obviously a political device designed to reduce tensions. This was a wise move, since the failure to do so would have added another explosive item to an already explosive situation. It is no secret that the great majority of the Russian working class rejects the collective dwelling. True, the student and the young worker seem to tolerate the hotel-like regimentation, but as soon as



Posters for communal kitchens and dining rooms, women’s industrial education

they marry they want a ‘home,’ something ‘individual.’ Be it ever so small, it is at least their own, where they can live for themselves and their family, firmly closing the door to the outside world.”<sup>12</sup>

The closing of the door, of course, took place on a national scale as “Papa Joe” Stalin’s project of building “a workers’ paradise in one country” restored the state-as-family, leader-as-father model to the Soviet Union and sent the foreign architects home to uncertain fates. On a certain level this abrupt end to the radical social and architectural projects of May and his confederates means that the potential of their ideas will never be known. However, something can be seen in the contrast of their vision of a culture of total production and the Stalinist model of what can fairly be described as state capitalism. In his book *Russia: An Architecture for World Revolution*, Lissitzky optimistically asserts, “In our country the factory has ceased to exist as a place of exploitation and as a hated institution. Work is the most noble of human activities. Once the term “Palace of Labor” is introduced it should, strictly speaking, refer to the factory... By virtue of exact division of time and work rhythm, and by making each individual share in a large common responsibility, the factory has become the real place of education – the university of the new Socialist man.”<sup>13</sup>

In the context of contemporary late-capitalism Lissitzky’s words may sound romantic, but perhaps the invocation of rhythm and timing and shared



Robot sculpture, woman worker and women's barracks housing in Magnetogorsk, photos by Margaret Bourke-White

responsibility also sounds sexy, at least in the abstract sense of making the factory a space of reproduction. The true purpose of city-factory or world-factory in the imagination of Lissitzky and May and the others seems to be less the production of valuable goods than the reproduction of social relations that allows everyone to share in the “nobility” of proletarian labor. In the Soviet Union the factory makes you. If the androgyny of a culture of factory workers seems masculinist, it is not because the “woman's space” of the kitchen and nursery has been eradicated but because the entire city has become kitchen, study and classroom. What is lost is the concentric, inward-looking symbolic order of couple, family, market, and state. This is replaced by the centerless, outward-facing linearity of the assembly line, but it is a line that produces subjectivity first and objects only as a means to this end. If there is any truth in the famous Cold War malapropism that there was then “no sex in the USSR”<sup>14</sup> then the opposite is true of the imaginary ideal of the Soviet *avant garde*. It's all sex in the socialist city.

1-4. May, Ernst, “Moscow: City Building in the USSR”, *DAS Neue Russland*, 1931, appendix in Lissitzky, *EI, Russia: An Architecture for World Revolution*, 1970 MIT Press translation.

5. Lissitzky, *EI, Russia: An Architecture for World Revolution*, 1970 MIT Press translation.

6-8. May, Ernst, “Moscow: City Building in the USSR”

9-12. Stein, Wilm, “Experiment: ‘Socialist Cities’: Realization of Communes too Expensive — Therefore Postponed”, *Bauwelt*, XXI, Berlin 1931, appendix in Lissitzky, *EI, Russia: An Architecture for World Revolution*, 1970 MIT Press translation,

13. Lissitzky, *EI, “The Reconstruction of Industrial Architecture”, Russia: An Architecture for World Revolution.*

14. The statement “There is no sex in the USSR... there is love,” was made by Liudmila Ivanova on the international telecast *US-Soviet Space Bridge* in 1982. Her words were truncated to the popularly repeated line.